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# Practising Performativity

## Transformative Moments in Research

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**ABSTRACT** Performativity is a theory of how reality comes into being. It is also a deconstructive practice. This article addresses the question of performativity as an emergent mode of working in social and cultural research. It does so by way of exploring a research project focusing on prostitution in a multiethnic context in north Norway, carried out by two researchers doing collaborative work on men, sexuality and knowledge. The author's interest is in exploring performativity as a mode of engaging, aimed at achieving transformations in the terms through which the real is constituted. The author argues that practising performativity requires an openness within the research process to the possibility that researchers and their practices themselves must alter. Such transformative modes of relating seem to be called for in order to develop effective ways of engaging with the present.

**KEY WORDS** methodology ♦ performativity ♦ prostitution ♦ research practice ♦ sexuality ♦ transformation

While the present produces a sense that one must *do something* as opposed to *doing theory*, I emphasise that this is a response from the point of contemporary theory. (Probyn, 2000: 51–2)

Performativity is a theory of how things – identities and other discursive effects – come into being. All research is performative, in the sense that it helps enact the real.<sup>1</sup> However, performativity is not only a theory, but also a deconstructive practice, which aims to displace those effects and bring out alternative worlds. Thus, performativity opens up discursively produced effects as sites of political contest.<sup>2</sup> The expression 'practising performativity' is meant to underline the political and interventionist possibilities in research. The obvious example of performativity as practice is writings in literature and philosophy that proceed by displacing the meanings of the literary or philosophical texts they discuss by rescripting the meanings of those texts.<sup>3</sup>

In this article, I address the question of performativity as an emergent

mode of working in social and cultural research. I do this by way of exploring a research project focusing on 'prostitution' in a multiethnic context in North Norway, which was carried out by two researchers doing collaborative work on men, sexuality and knowledge. This project is marginal in relation to the dominant institutions and traditions of feminist research and has not been developed to yield traditional academic publications. However, in dealing with some of the political, economic and emotional complexities of the highly controversial discursive field of prostitution, the project is a productive site for studying how, specifically, research might enter processes through which things come into being, intervene in the terms of the real.

The interest feeding my enquiry is in exploring performativity as a mode of engaging in social and cultural research, aimed at achieving particular kinds of transformations: transformations in the very terms in which the real is constituted. For any such performativity to take place, research needs to enter public space, academic or otherwise – a space that is 'public in the sense of accessible, available to memory, and sustained through collective activity' (Berlant and Warner, 2000: 326). The project on prostitution in North Norway incorporates a strong sense of the crucial role of different forms of publics for negotiating the phenomenon of prostitution. Seeing prostitution as a discursive phenomenon, the researchers had objectives of intervening in those discourses. This necessitated allowing themselves to become part of public spaces where those discourses were enacted. Studying such public or collective sites, I find performativities in the form of moments in which shifts occur in the meaning and reality of its object of study – prostitution. As the researchers obviously were not in control of the terms of the discourses, 'practising performativity' involved opening up the project in ways that could not be fully foreclosed by any methodological designs, and that allowed their voices as researchers to be intercepted or even misconstrued by others.

As a form of 'ontological politics' (Law, 2004; Mol, 1999), practising performativity represents world-making efforts. If these efforts are to be successful, the research needs to be responsive to the challenges thrown up by the immediate situation it finds itself in. In the project I discuss here, these challenges were to do with the immediate life circumstances of the men and women the researchers engaged with, but also with the enactment of prostitution in media, politics, public policy and research. Whatever the stakes are in a specific project, I argue that 'doing' performativity, not as theory but as a mode of working, requires an openness within the research process to the possibility that the researchers and their practices themselves must alter, in response to the situations in which they find themselves. Such openness increases the ability to enact shifts in the phenomenon being studied, and thus also sharpens the transformative power of feminism. Refusing an enactment of the outcomes of research as

'after the fact', such transformative modes of relating seem to be called for in order to develop effective ways of engaging with the present.

## DECONSTRUCTIVE EFFORTS

In 2002, a preliminary study on Russian prostitution in North Norway, was carried out by two collaborating researchers, Britt Kramvig and Kirsten Stien.<sup>4</sup> The project was based on fieldwork in Finnmark, the northernmost county in Norway. It was funded by the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs and the Ministry of Justice and the Police. The funding decision followed a period of intense media attention around the prevalence of Russian prostitution in Finnmark, particularly in the community of Tana. The main objectives of the project were to identify 'relevant research questions and research foci as regards Russian prostitution in North Norway' and suggest 'concrete actions that seem important in relation to the processes that were triggered following the opening of the border towards the East' (Kramvig and Stien, 2002b: 3). Reporting from the project, the researchers write from a position that questions or deconstructs the very terms within which their research is framed. Stating their reservations about terms such as 'prostitution' and 'sale of sex', they contend:

We are of the opinion that those relations that the women and men we have talked to describe, are more nuanced and diverse than what is denoted by these categories. (Kramvig and Stien, 2002b: 5)

The researchers' aim was to counter dominant discursive trends associated with the enactment of prostitution in Finnmark.

Why engage with this project? My interest in it has to do with the 'modes of working' of the two researchers, and in particular what they had spoken of as an 'action-orientation' in their work. However, the point was not that their work was 'different' compared to the work of others. Rather, my concern was that this way of working encompass what one could term an 'otherness' that is usually not spoken about in the more authoritative stories about research, such as those told in textbooks on research methods or in accounts of methodologies in formal research presentations. This being my interest, Kramvig and Stien's project gives me access to such 'othered' parts of research practice.

## OPENING UP RESEARCH PROCESSES

This enquiry is also intended as a contribution to the emergent stories of feminist research. In feminism, there is an ongoing process of

'professionalizing' methodological work. This is taking place through the development of more women's and gender studies teaching programmes across Europe, including new research schools and the development of textbooks and teaching materials.<sup>5</sup> While such processes of professionalization and institutionalization are important, they risk leading to a kind of mainstreaming that will make academic feminism less sensitive to difference in and around feminism. Academic feminism has been a particularly fertile ground for methodological innovations. Effective engagement with the present demands a continual reviewing and reworking of our methodologies in ways that avoid presuming the anteriority of the reality with which we deal. The challenge is to balance the pull towards professionalization with a continued willingness to open up to the often troubling challenges of the present moment.

The notion of performativity plays a central part in this article in marking a body of thinking that aims precisely at opening up to such challenges. An author such as Judith Butler has, through working with gender and sexuality as performatives, as something that we 'do' (Butler, 1990: 24–5), aimed at opening up the concepts of gender and sexuality as they are performed in the present moment, at 'undoing' them and thus also their effects. In her most recent book, *Undoing Gender*, she aims to do this by focusing on phenomena such as transgender, transsexuality and intersex. Speaking about transsexuality, she contends:

The diagnostic means by which transsexuality is attributed implies a pathologisation, but undergoing that pathologising process constitutes one of the important ways in which the desire to change one's sex might be satisfied. The critical question thus becomes, how might the world be reorganized so that this conflict can be ameliorated? (Butler, 2004: 5)

While transsexuals who aim to undergo hormonal or surgical treatment in order to alter their sexed bodies benefit from the diagnostic regime framing them as suffering from gender identity disorder, the price they pay is that of pathologization, and Butler links this to the violence against transsexuals that has resulted in a number of high profile murders in the US (Butler, 2004: 6). In opening herself up to this deeply problematic situation, she aims at nothing less than 'reorganizing' the world. One may see this as a naive aim, or, alternatively – and this would be my preference – one may pay attention to what happens to oneself in reading her proposals. Did not something shift in how I see the problematic of transsexuality? Clearly, the resistance against Butler's thinking also speaks of its power to actually enact transformations in the minds of her readers, and perhaps beyond.

What Judith Butler aims at doing for gender and sexuality, science studies scholar John Law aims at doing for research methods in his newest book, *After Method*. His proposals are grounded in the notion of performativity and its close relative 'enactment'; that is, he sees the world

as coproduced by research methods, by the practices that make up research. His concerns are with complexities, with the multiple ways in which the world is 'textured', in particular those textures that conventional social science enquiry tends to miss out on, such as the ephemeral, the indefinite and the irregular (Law, 2004: 4). His examples are drawn from a wide range of studies, of which I briefly just mention two: Annemarie Mol's study of multiplicities in medical practice (patient consultation, radiology and operating theatre each producing a different though not unrelated version of atherosclerosis) and his own study of a Quaker meeting for worship (producing silences that enable an opening up to the divine). Multiplicities and divinities – just two of the kinds of realities that frequently are othered by conventional research methods.

Where Butler aims at opening up to how gender and sexuality are enacted in the present moment, undoing effects of those enactments that make life less liveable for some, Law aims at opening up to enactments of research in the present moment. The concern is with undoing certain effects of those enactments: undoing the 'othering' of parts of reality that are too 'messy' for conventional methods to perceive. Conventional methods have a tendency to privilege singularity, coherence, things with definite form. In order to open up to the ephemeral, the indefinite, the irregular, he argues, not that method should be abandoned, but that it should be 'broadened', made more 'generous'. His argument is not one of 'anything goes', however:

Method does not 'report' on something that is already there. Instead, in one way or another, it makes things more or less different. The issue becomes how to make things different, and what to make. Method, then, unavoidably produces arrangements with political implications. (Law, 2004: 143)

A vital part of Law's argument concerns the question of how to go about such a subversion of method and one – though not the only – dimension of his answer is concerned with issues of style and, in particular, with metaphor – we need to find other vocabularies for speaking of method. This hints at a dilemma inherent in 'theorizing' research or its methods. If the challenge in opening up to the world is one of attending to methods as performative, as practices, then we need less determinate ways of *talking* about methods.<sup>6</sup> Stressing metaphor rather than theory suggests we need more fluid ways of talking about what we do. This call for more imaginative vocabularies resonates with what I aim to do when I argue for shifting the attention from performativity as a theory of what we do as researchers to performativity as a practice, an actively chosen mode of engaging as researchers. One aspect of such a shift is precisely that of metaphor, finding ways of talking about such ways of engaging. However, it is also about finding more fluid ways of working, beyond

words. It is not just about what we say we do, but also about what we actually *do*.

My argument, though it applies to ethnography and methods, is not restricted to this. It also implies opening up more basic methodological, theoretical and epistemological issues. This more radical and emergent questioning of the character of adequate research, though often raised in epistemological debates, is curiously often left out in prescriptive methodologies as well as accounts of research.<sup>7</sup>

## RESEARCH IN PUBLIC

What had caught my attention in the research of Kramvig and Stien was among other things precisely to do with such an opening up of the research process – an opening up that allowed the ongoing research to enter the public or collective contexts in which the phenomenon of study was enacted.

The main formal output of the project is a 45-page report (Kramvig and Stien, 2002b). It presents the research that was carried out as based on the funding from the two ministries that commissioned the work, including the recommendations of the researchers for further research and policy. Beyond thus delivering what the government commissioned them to do, the researchers have engaged with various publics along the way, including local publics in Finnmark, local and national newspapers (through media reports from the project, as well as columns authored by the researchers) and various research communities (through presentations in seminars, a text in a Nordic research magazine, participation in research networks, participation in this PhD project) (Kramvig and Stien, 2002d).

Adopting a vocabulary of 'perspectives', 'interpretive horizons', 'experiences' and 'life worlds', the two researchers tend towards a generalized hermeneutic and phenomenological orientation that is fairly strong at the University of Tromsø, where these two researchers, like myself, were trained.<sup>8</sup> However, while the orientation of the researchers towards language and the role publics have in forming or resisting specific ways of talking can be seen as consistent with their hermeneutics, this feature of their work comes out of a more Foucauldian concern with discursive practices. Their core orientation is precisely towards prostitution as a complex discursive phenomenon: a 'condensation' *made up* of 'many different and complex interests and not least uncertainties and anxieties, linked to the industrial, economic, political and social upheavals that are taking place in the North' (Kramvig and Stien, 2002b: 8).

It is against this background that the attention paid by the researchers to the role of local publics must be seen, the role of local publics in finding adequate language for the changes associated with the break-up of the

Soviet Union and for the emotional, sexual and economic links involving Russian women and men from Norway that this gave rise to. The notion of publics (*offentligheter*) is in part a reference to the role the public spaces provided by mass media play in defining the terms of the phenomenon, as when they point to 'attempts at emphasising the significance of a shift of language' through media reports and interviews (Kramvig and Stien, 2002b: 8). There is also a sense of the limits of the mass media as public spaces, as when they talk about having 'faith in other forms of publics than the one that media at any point in time represent' (Kramvig and Stien 2002a). In line with this, they foreground notions of the collective and communities (*felleskap*) as setting the parameters for how sexuality is practised, and apply a 'perspective' on sexuality – including the sale of sex – as a fundamentally collective phenomenon. This allows the researchers to figure the men who buy sex as actors within a wider public sphere in which sexuality is negotiated and in which they as researchers also participate.

However, it is the ways in which this orientation towards publicly negotiated discourses comes through in the *practices* of the researchers that I am interested in here, and more specifically in how the research process is opened up to performativities. To explore this, I focus on two sites of involvement in their project: first, the researchers' media involvement, and second, an 'open house' – a private home that functions as a semi-public meeting-place where Russian women on short-term trips to Norway stay.

## TRANSFORMATIVE MOMENTS IN MEDIA WORK

Kramvig and Stien's media work fell into two distinct phases. The first occurred after their project was funded in December 2001. The second followed the completion of the report in July 2002 and was initiated by the researchers. There has been substantial media attention to prostitution in Tana – the area that formed the chief focus of their project. Elsewhere in Norway, 'Tana' and 'Skiippagurra' (the location of a camp site that served as one of the bases of prostitution in Finnmark) came to mean prostitution and not much else. When they started this project, the researchers were entering a high-intensity discursive space. Thus, though there was no public announcement when their project was funded in December 2001, the funding decision was still reported by the Norwegian News Agency, and then picked up by a number of newspapers around the country, resulting in a flurry of phone calls from journalists to Britt Kramvig, who was project manager. Much of the coverage that followed seemed to frame prostitution in conventional ways – as indeed did the project proposal itself. Its title was 'Traffic in Prostitution in the North', and the



reservations about terms such as 'prostitution', 'sale of sex' and 'trafficking' found in the concluding report are not expressed here. The proposal was a pragmatic document written for a funding body rather than for a larger public, but as the researchers came to learn, even the most preliminary formulations have real implications. Not only did the media coverage pick up on the conventional terminology of the proposal, but it was integrated into discursive formations involving stereotypical images of Russian women, images that the proposal was in fact trying to counter.

A few newspapers covered the project more substantially, two of them through printing criticisms made of the project. The first major coverage appeared in one of the most important newspapers in Finnmark, *Finnmark Dagblad*, on 17 January 2002, only weeks after the funding decision. The first page headline read 'No Russian Whores in Finnmark'. The article reported the views of a local politician about the project and Kramvig's response to this. According to the newspaper, the politician thought it was 'undignified that the state spends money on such research', and he is quoted as saying:

I do not know of us having Russian prostitutes here in [this area], or in other parts of Finnmark. If such a milieu exists, I demand to be informed. We have some Russian girls who live here in the area. Some of these are also married here. Is it these girls NORUT Finnmark and Britt Kramvig have it in for?

In response to this intimation that their proposed research was damaging to Russian women in Finnmark, Kramvig is quoted as saying, 'It may well be that [this politician] is correct, if he thinks that prostitution does not exist.'

Three things happen in this exchange. (1) The prospective research is read as being part of what the researchers later wrote about as the discourse on prostitution, a discourse defining Russian women as prostitutes and rural bachelors in Finnmark as buyers of sex. (2) Resistance against this discourse is expressed. As the researchers put it in the report, the politician's alleged statements, denying the existence of prostitution, can be seen as 'an attempt to end the discursive organization of Russian women into the category prostitutes and Norwegian/Sámi bachelors into the category *horekunder* [literally 'whore customers']' (Kramvig and Stien, 2002b: 9). (3) In acknowledging that the politician may be correct, Kramvig opens herself to the possibility of this resistance having some grounds. Thus, a version of reality is being enacted in which prostitution seems to have a highly uncertain existence.

A similar destabilization of prostitution takes place in an exchange in *Klassekampen*, a small left-wing national newspaper. This article addresses the stigmatization of Russian women, particularly relating to the apparently largely unfounded fear of HIV being brought to Finnmark by

Russian prostitutes. In very polemical terms, the research application is read as contributing to these fears and to the stigmatization of Russian women. In response to this, the researchers wrote:

We are open to the possibility that our choices are wrong choices. But we are willing to make attempts to nuance, hopefully without stigmatizing – what the motives of women from the east and men from the west are with regard to establishing relations of different kinds. We are not certain that we will succeed. The stories that already have been established and the fear that seems to be linked to the changes that have taken place in the Barents Region<sup>9</sup> may turn out to be too overwhelming. Also in ourselves. The intense media attention, and extracts from a more overarching approach in a project proposal, seem precisely to tell us that this work may be meaningless if one doesn't have faith in other forms of publics than the one that media at any point in time represent. (Kramvig and Stien, 2002a)

Again, prostitution is set into play through the tripartite movement between (1) reading the research as part of a stigmatizing discourse, (2) countering that discourse and (3) the researchers' contribution to that resistance. This time around, that contribution takes the form, first, of stressing their intention to nuance what the motives for the relations between the men and women in question might be and, second, of communicating faith in other publics than media. Again, a version of reality in which prostitution may turn out to be an inadequate or mistaken term emerges.

As in Kramvig's response to the journalist in *Finnmark Dagblad*, here the two researchers avoid committing to any specific position on prostitution, though they contribute to the resistance to the conventional ways in which it gets framed. They are obviously also aware that they have yet to carry out the empirical work for the project and that they need to present themselves in ways that don't prevent their access to relevant materials. However, in doing that, they make use of a 'perspective' on sexuality that effectively contributes to an enactment of prostitution that questions its very existence or figures it in different terms. Thus, even before the research is carried out, they are participating in a deconstruction of prostitution: they are 'setting to work' the 'perspectives' that later will be developed in the report and other written outputs of the project.

The notion of a 'setting to work' I take from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak who, following Derrida, talks of a 'setting to work' of deconstruction. If deconstruction means naming the traces left by the displacement or 'othering' implied in any categorization, then a 'setting to work' of deconstruction implies opening up of that deconstruction, that proposed naming of otherness, to judgement from outside its own sustained formalization as theory (Spivak, 1999: 428). In the work of Kramvig and Stien, it is such a 'setting to work' that enacts the transformative moments, moments in which a version of the phenomenon of

'prostitution' appears for which the term 'prostitution' might not be applicable at all.<sup>10</sup>

It is important to stress that the researchers are not denying the existence of prostitution or the sale of sex in Finnmark. Rather, their reservations about naming the relations that men in Norway have with Russian women as 'prostitution' speaks of a desire for specificity. This strategy implies a potential for taking the various relations involving exchanges of sex and money even more seriously than an indiscriminate application of the term 'prostitution' allows for. What specifically is the nature of relations where money changes hands in return for sexual access to others' bodies? What is the economic specificity of those relations? Their emotional specificity? How do they link in with the ethnic dynamics in the area? These are my questions, but Kramvig and Stien's intervention has opened the ground for asking them. Pursuing such questions can lead to better understandings of the complex interweavings of sexuality, gender, ethnicity, migration, economic inequalities, research, politics and public policy in this field. A bold strategy in a preliminary report to the government in a country where the Centre for Gender Equality, a subagency of the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, proposes that the purchase of sex is outlawed, as is the case in neighbouring Sweden.<sup>11</sup>

#### TRANSFORMATIVE MOMENTS IN ETHNOGRAPHIC WORK

A similar performativity can be identified in an encounter between the researchers and a number of men in an 'open house' that Russian women on short-term visits to Norway sometimes stay at. Though many researchers working in the area will be aware of the existence of such semi-public houses in Finnmark, including the role they play in relation to sexuality, Kramvig and Stien are the first researchers to highlight the role of these houses in relation to the multifaceted relations between local men and Russian women. An account of the encounter in the house features as a key passage in the report. The account opens by stating the nature of the researchers' own relation with the men: the men were people they 'got to know better'. Kramvig and Stien go on to explain the material context of that developing relation: how much and what kind of time they spent together (weekdays and weekends, mornings as well as evenings), as well as what they did together (shopping, eating, talking). As we read on, we find a presentation of the men's response to the researchers: it is specified that while at first they were perhaps perceived as a little exciting or suspicious, they soon 'came to be experienced as quite ordinary women', people the men could relate to 'in confidence'. And then the researchers state:

The confidence had among other things the effect that it after a while came to be expected that we would vouch for what we may call 'an ordering presence'. We were for instance asked whether we would spend the night in the house the day that the Russian women were due to arrive, and without this being made explicit we understood that it might be experienced as safe to have us in the house. (Kramvig and Stien, 2002b: 33)

In the remainder of the account, Kramvig and Stien unwrap the situation in the house so as to explain how they could be allocated such a role, starting with introducing the voice of one of the men:

*Russian women and money – money is what matters most to them. We are being exploited by them. They steal what we have from us. But it is better to receive than not to receive anything. They call from Murmansk [in northwest Russia]. Are you at home? We will come tomorrow to you. Yes, I am home. It's all right. Just come. What shall we do? Can you call other Norwegian men? Do they have money? We need a little money. I call Norwegian mates. I have taken care of everything. Just come. Yes, they will come. No problem. All the Norwegian and Finnish mates come here. It is my best mates who are here. But they are exploiting me. It is only me who pays. They don't pay. I am tired of having them in my home. You must understand that I am a human being who wants peace and quiet if I have the chance. I don't know how I can handle the problems. I would like to move. (Kramvig and Stien, 2002b: 33–4)*

The account goes on:

One of the owners said this concerning how contact between Russian women and Norwegian men is created and sustained. . . . The arrangement is an open call in the sense that the Norwegian men don't necessarily pay for themselves, and the home of the host is invaded in ways that may be experienced as troublesome and chaotic. Not only could the men voice their complaints to us, we also functioned as representatives of an ordering ordinariness where our sheer presence could safeguard against a situation that was experienced as on the limit of acceptability. Seen in a perspective in which sexuality is understood as a continuum, and buying sex is not deviant or in breach, but an exaggeration or a matter of 'stretching the limits',<sup>12</sup> our ordering function is placed in a meaningful context. This focus transfers the perspective away from the guilt and responsibility of the individual and over to them as collective agents in a context where the community gives the framework for the practice of sexuality, power and disempowerment. The community may have room for several voices, and as we noted we experienced being invited as justified participants into something about to happen and which it wasn't quite clear how could be managed. (Kramvig and Stien, 2002b: 34)

The materials here are presented as contingent upon the researchers' participation in the encounter. The encounter is constituted as an event not just in the context of the research but also in the life of the proprietor of the house. The man obviously finds the situation unfolding in his house hard to handle and makes use of the researchers in trying to deal with it.

Not only does he form part of the researchers' work, of their process of knowing, but the researchers also became part of the work that the man did in managing issues in his own life, in *his* process of knowing. As a result, the researchers effectively contributed to a space that this man tried to build for himself in order to alter a situation that he found deeply problematic.

A clue as to how the researchers read his situation is found in the report as they explain why they are paying attention to 'men who have different and heterogeneous relations with Russian women', trying to 'dissolve the stigmatization that for example the label *horekunde* [whore customer] implies':

We want to be open to the idea that some of these men have been caught up in events they didn't quite see the implications of, and that it is important in such a situation to make provisions for reconciliation and rehabilitation. (Kramvig and Stien, 2002b: 7)

The events that unfolded in the encounter between men and researchers are thus described as events that contribute to a transformation that the owner of the house sought, perhaps in order to reconnect with other forms of community than that provided by his mates. This transformative moment was achieved as the researchers let themselves become part of his project of making sense and getting on with his life, part of a collective space in which sexual relations – and other relational phenomena – were negotiated, a space where the researchers became relevant actors in the relationships between men from Norway and women from Russia.

Thus, as in the media work, the researchers contributed to transformative moments in the enactment of relations between these men and women. This was only possible because the researchers assumed that the relations between the men and women were multifaceted, and sought to show this in relating to the men. This allowed them access to a site where research materials could be produced. It also opened up their own research practice in a way that represents a 'setting to work' of their own perspectives in the space of this man's life. He was able to use their presence, grounded as it was in those perspectives, for the purpose of transforming a situation that he found deeply troubling. This opening up or destabilization of the research practice through a 'setting to work' of their perspectives during the research process is what enables the transformative moment. We do not know whether or how this man was able to follow through the transformations that he sought. But somehow the researchers played a part in that process. This was an encounter where a specific version of reality got strengthened, however precariously: a version in which it might be possible to see this

man as worthy of respect in his own eyes and in those of the larger community.

## PERFORMATIVITY AS EMERGENT METHODOLOGY?

Practising performativity demands such ontological encounters, encounters in which the terms of the real are allowed to shift. If feminist research is committed to enacting transformations in the gendered and sexualized conditions of possibility that give shape to our lives, then it becomes pivotal to find effective ways of engaging ontologically, engaging in and with the present. It is attempts at such engagement that I find in the research of Kramvig and Stien. In both their media work and their ethnographic work they expose their 'perspectives' to encounters in which prostitution is destabilized and fragments of a more complex landscape of relations emerge. Such a 'setting to work' of their analytical take in various public or collective contexts helps enact possibilities of living, in whatever small ways. Perhaps it also helps open the ground for shifts in 'sexuality' itself, including the complex political, ethnic, economic and emotional dynamics that it is part of.

Whatever the desired or achieved transformations might be in Kramvig and Stien's research, what are *my* transformative desires? In addition to contributing to Kramvig and Stien's efforts, I would like to see more deconstructive imaginings and practices that enable feminists to attend to the specificity and interrelatedness of the phenomena we engage with. This is a concern with reality. However, it is a concern that is inextricably linked to research itself: I would like to see further explorations of the ontological possibilities of research processes, in academic contexts and beyond. Forms of involvement that aim to take on the present through transforming the traditional backstage of research – its process of making – into its performative possibility.

Can thus practising performativity be contained within a language of methodology? Can performativity be, not just a theory of what happens in research anyway, that is, a theory of the coproduction of research and reality, but rather a mode of doing research that we can actively choose and teach to others? If we imagine methodology as what we actually do, and as the process of finding out how to do it, rather than as (semi-) prescriptive accounts of how we *should* do it, perhaps the range of experiments in practising performativity that we already find in feminist research can be figured as emergent methodologies. Or perhaps the experimenting moment that the performative turn represents will imagine quite different languages for its practices than that of methodology.

Effective engagement with the present needs to proceed from a recognition of the coproduction of research and reality, needs to refuse the

notion that reality already happened. What kinds of researchers do we need to be in order to engage in such ways? What skills do we need to cultivate in order that our research can better contribute to the public imaginings and makings of new worlds? These are questions that an emergent performative methodology – by whatever name – would need to address.

## NOTES

1. Such enactments have been studied extensively by a number of science studies scholars. John Law has theorized the performativity of research practices in the social sciences (Law, 2004).
2. In research on gender and sexuality, this point has been most influentially argued by Judith Butler (1990, 1993).
3. Thus, queer theory authors such as Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick deconstruct the literary texts that form their subject of study by rewriting them in ways that expose their discursive workings and bring out queer meanings (Pearce, 2004: 179–90).
4. What follows is based on an ongoing research process. It was funded as a preliminary study of prostitution in 2002, but as a research process it extends beyond this specific project. The project was published as a report to the two Norwegian ministries that funded the project (Kramvig and Stien, 2002b). In addition to general news coverage, further outcomes included a short article in the Nordic gender research publication *NIKK magasin* and a number of columns to the press (Kramvig and Stien, 2002c, 2002d, 2002e; Stien and Kramvig, 2002). I am most grateful to the researchers in question for the permission to use materials from the project, many of which remain unpublished.
5. For a recent textbook example, see Ramazanoğlu and Holland (2002). On the European level, processes of professionalization are taking place through Athena, a network of higher education women's and gender studies programmes in Europe. The activities of Athena 2, which runs from 2003 to 2006, include the development of European training at PhD level, developing joint educational prototypes, evaluation of MA and PhD curricula in women's and gender studies and a range of other teaching resources. On the Nordic level, epistemology, methodology and pedagogics feature strongly on the programme of events for the newly formed Nordic Research School for Interdisciplinary Gender Research, for which I am a board member. For further information, see [www.nikk.uio.no/arrangerment/forskerkurs/f\\_skole/index\\_e.html](http://www.nikk.uio.no/arrangerment/forskerkurs/f_skole/index_e.html).
6. The stress on metaphor Law shares with many in science and technology studies (STS), not least in feminist STS, particularly with Donna Haraway.
7. Thus, in their in many ways very useful textbook on feminist methodology, Ramazanoğlu and Holland, in the concluding chapter of the book, titled 'Choices and Decisions', where they present their practical recommendation for novice researchers, write: 'Once you have focused your questions, sorted out your beliefs about knowledge and reality, and decided on the level or levels of your gender analysis, you can design your research project and select techniques of data production' (Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002: 154). Neither the weight on 'choices and decisions', the apparent positing of

ontology as a question of 'beliefs' rather than 'choices' or 'decisions', the treatment of 'reflexivity' in this chapter only on the level of methods, nor the linearity of the research process suggested by the organization of the chapter and condensed in the sentence I just quoted, give any allowance for the kinds of openness during the research process that I propose here.

8. This training included exposure to versions of the continental phenomenological tradition and symbolic interactionism. Siri Gerrard and Halldis Valestrand (1999) have written on the specificity of the social research tradition at the University of Tromsø, from the point of view of gender research. Viggo Rossvær's book *Ruinlandskap og modernitet* is a phenomenological and hermeneutic study of a small place in Finnmark that has been a particular inspiration for the two researchers from this tradition (Rossvær, 1998).
9. The Barents Region spans northern Norway, northern Sweden, northern Finland and northwest Russia. It was established as a cooperative region in 1993, on the initiative of the then Foreign Minister of Norway, Thorvald Stoltenberg, in response to the break-up of the Soviet Union.
10. This resonates with an argument made by John Law and Vicky Singleton concerning alcohol abuse, in which in place of a stable object such as 'alcoholic liver disease' they find 'the performance of *fragments* of alcohol abuse realities' (Law and Singleton, 2000). Similarly, prostitution in the context of this project seems to dissolve into multiple fragmented realities, including (though not limited to) 'prostitution' and 'heterogeneous relations between men from Norway and women from Russia'.
11. May-Len Skilbrei is currently doing research on the discourses around control of prostitution in Norway, Sweden and Denmark (at: [www.jus.uio.no/prosjekter/npn/nettsted/skilbrei.html](http://www.jus.uio.no/prosjekter/npn/nettsted/skilbrei.html)).
12. Footnote in original: 'The concept is taken from Brantsæter, M., Seksuelle overgrep mot barn – ikke et avvik? *Mannsforskning* nr. 1, 2002.' The title of this reference translates as 'Sexual Assaults against Children – No Deviation?'

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